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CRYPTOZOOLOGY CONFERENCE 1987

by MIKE DASH

Edinburgh: Auld Reekie itself. The city of Adam Smith, Sir Walter Scott and that rather unpleasant Scott monument. The town famed as the Athens of the North and (if one believes Comyns Beaumont) the true location of the biblical city of Jerusalem.

Well, enough of the travelogue. From the forteen point of view, Edinburgh has offered little of interest since we chronicled an unseasonal fall of snow there on 2 June 1975 [FT12 p5], but on 25 and 26 July 1987 the city hosted the annual conference of the International Society of Cryptozoology, held jointly with the Society for the History of Natural History. It was a two-day affair dealing with 'The search for Nessie in the 1980s' and 'Some cats of cryptozoology', and was held in the impressive surroundings of the Royal Museum of Scotland. Not that the general public were made aware of it – they were ushered into the lecture theatre the back way, through rather a seedy coffee bar, while Society members got to use the front door.

LOCH NESS RETROSPECTIVE

The three sessions dealing with the Loch Ness phenomenon were a little disappointing, being of an almost exclusively retrospective nature. Dr Paul LeBlond's promised reinterpretation of the 'Surgeon's picture' [see FT46 pp62–5] – a "size determination based on physical principles" – turned out to be no more than a tease for a forthcoming article in the Society's journal *Cryptozoology*. Having explained a little of the mathematics necessary to calculate the size of the 'head and neck' using the distance between backround waves as a reference, LeBlond (a University of British Columbia Oceanographer who used the same technique to analyse the Mansi 'Champ' photo) cut his talk short just as things were getting interesting. He did suggest, however, that the object portrayed was unlikely to be more than 120cm (about 4 feet) high, and during the question session at the end of the day, monster researcher Alastair Boyd quoted from a previously-unrecorded press report in which the

surgeon himself estimated that the head/neck was about three feet out of the water [*Daily Mail* 20 April 1934]. These figures should be compared to Steuart Campbell's estimate of 70cm.

Other speakers trod some very well-worn paths. Richard Fitter, chairman of the Flora & Fauna Preservation Society, opened the proceedings with a brief history of the monster and the Loch Ness Investigation Bureau; he was followed by Roy Mackal, who reappraised the arguments for and against various monster candidates. In this he closely followed the discussion in his book *The monsters of Loch Ness* (1976). Since then, Mackal – whom FT readers will remember in connection with the Congo dinosaur hunt [FT45 p4, FT46 pp5–6, FT47 pp22–5] – has abandoned his favoured 'hypothetical amphibian' theory and added an equally hypothetical zeuglodon – a form of prehistoric whale, serpentine but short-necked – to the list of possibles.

The tempo of the meeting was raised when Prof. Mackal told the audience of 110 about his own, unpublished, monster sighting (1967). Mackal, who described himself as "totally committed and no longer scientifically objective", was converted from scepticism by the sight of a 2–3m long back surfacing close to the boat from which he was servicing LNIB hydrophones. To one side, the tip of what the Chicago biochemist took to be a left pectoral flipper – black, hairless and with "some evidence of wrinkling" – was periodically visible. There was a further surprise when Mackal offered some hope to proponents of the much-debunked 'plesiosaur hypothesis', noting that another reptile, the leatherback turtle, had confounded critics by maintaining its body temperature 17 degrees above the ambient temperature of water only a few degrees warmer than that of Loch Ness, making it theoretically possible for reptiles to survive in cold northern lakes.

Another of Prof. Mackal's newer theories – the migration of monsters through river systems – was introduced to explain the problematical lack of physical remains and likely deterioration of the gene pool among a captive

herd breeding in the lake over a period of several thousand years. Several sighting reports from the River Ness and Beaully Firth were adduced in support of this contention, and the speaker suggested that a specimen might be provided by netting designated Canadian rivers while the salmon were running.

Henry Bauer, who followed Mackal, is the author of a new book on the Loch Ness phenomenon [reviewed on p70]. His 40 minutes were devoted to analysis of public perception of the monster. Although some rather obvious points were made – anomaly reporting is a function of newspaper editorial policy rather than number of sightings; the conservative attitude of the press towards most fortune slows public acceptance of a phenomenon – the bulk of this paper was devoted to an interesting analysis of newspaper, magazine and periodical reporting of Loch Ness, drawn from an article which Bauer published several years ago in *Cryptozoology*. An examination of national and local newspapers revealed a peak of interest in the period December 1933 – January 1934 which did not correspond to any increase in the number of sightings, but concluded a period of growing certainty that there was at least a case to answer. These two months were succeeded by a rapid decline in serious coverage occasioned by several well-publicised hoaxes. The London *Times*, for example, ran 65 Loch Ness stories in the December–January period, and only one in the next 11 months.

Surveying national and local papers, science journals, popular science magazines and the specialist anomaly press over a 50-year period, Bauer concluded that there had been a generally neutral or slightly disbelieving tone to stories written in the period 1933–54. Thereafter, articles became slightly less jocular and more serious, being most positive in the mid- and late-1970s. An explosion of favourable coverage followed the 1975 Rines photos and the *New York Times*'s 1976 sponsorship of activities at Loch Ness, but it was a period in which UFOs and 'occult' subjects also generated much favourable reporting. Dr Bauer concluded by observing that since we are now in the middle of a reporting 'depression', even fairly dramatic news from the loch might not receive much coverage.

RECENT INVESTIGATIONS AT LOCH NESS

The afternoon session was given over to three of the most persistent Loch Ness activists. Adrian Shine, field leader of the Loch Ness & Morar Project, took his somewhat

bemused audience on a rapid jog through quite a complex discussion of the Loch's biology and underwater acoustics. In the course of this, he showed underwater TV pictures of the loch bed which illustrated the lack of gas build-up in the floor sediment and tended to undermine the ever-popular 'vegetable mat' explanation for monster sightings. Shine also demonstrated that while there was an abundance of fish near the surface, and surprisingly numerous colonies of eels and char at the bottom, there was nothing to attract a monster to the 'desert water' – empty deep mid-water – in which strong sonar echoes were, perversely, being recorded. This should increase our scepticism of such mid-water contacts, Shine suggested.

Robert Rines, of the Academy of Applied Science, gave an impassioned speech in which he criticised armchair speculators and "book authors". They "do no service to cryptozoology... They don't want to know anything real – it might interfere with their theories," he said. The debunkers were "the enemies of cryptozoology," Rines asserted, and he went on to give his own version of the events of 1972 and 1975 which led to the taking of controversial underwater 'flipper' and 'gargoyle' photos. Rines also brought the Academy's Loch Ness activities up to date and hinted at a future expedition using a piece of "recently declassified" US Government equipment which would see "practically everything" in the loch. He later refused to elaborate on this tantalising piece of information.

Rines was not in Edinburgh to make converts. His own sighting of an "elephant back" hump in the mouth of Urquhart Bay was enough for him, and he told the assembled throng, "I don't care if any of you believe anything. You don't mean anything to me as far as that goes." After all the criticism Rines has had to endure, his belief-centred address was understandable and it was human. It was not, however, scientific, and one shudders to think of its likely reception if delivered to the arch-priests of scientism at the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In front of an audience made up of members of the ISC and the general public, though, Rines went down well and earned himself the loudest and longest applause of the conference.

Monster-hunting veteran Tim Dinsdale was similarly warmly received as he accepted honorary life membership of the ISC. His paper, which concluded the afternoon's entertainment, was a well-illustrated retrospective of 27 years in the field, and included a viewing of the famous 'Dinsdale film' and excerpts from Tim's film archive of witness interviews.

TAXONOMIC DESCRIPTION OF THE KELLAS CAT

The fields of Scotland were the subject of the first two papers delivered on Sunday. The shorter second day (five papers to the seven delivered on the Saturday) was more interesting and more up-to-date than the Loch Ness sessions – unsurprisingly, given the current vibrancy of alien big cat (ABC) research. Di Francis and Dr Karl Shuker delivered complementary papers to an audience of about 70 in the museum lecture theatre, dealing with British ABCs and particularly the specimens obtained from Dallas, in the Moray area of the Scottish highlands, during the years 1984–5 [see FT45 pp10–12].

Di Francis began with the story of her own involvement with the subject, displaying photos of Welsh ABCs taken from her book, *Cat country* (1983), and playing a recording of the cat's nocturnal cry. She emphasised the importance of field research and pointed out that during the Surrey Puma 'flap', police had thrown out or mis-classified sighting reports which did not match their own idea of what the 'puma' should look like. In fact witnesses reported cats with un-puma-like stripes and red-brown or black coats. Di went on to give an over-view of her field-work in Devon and Scotland. Having described the provenance of the Dallas cats, most of them shot on the Kellas estate of Mr Thomas Christie, she produced a stuffed specimen to much camera clicking.

Dr Karl Shuker of Birmingham University then gave a taxonomic description of the one Kellas specimen he had examined. It had a 65cm long body, a 30cm tail, and stood 36cm high at the shoulder – which made it approximately wildcat-sized. The animal had a squat, broad head with pricked ears and a short, narrow muzzle; it also possessed prominent upper canines similar to those of the clouded leopard and – unlike the leopard – almost equally well-developed lower canines. The Kellas specimen had three supernumary teeth, the same dental complement as that of some wildcats.

In colour the Kellas cat was black, with dark chocolate ventral underhair and prominent long, almost glittery, white guard hairs. Its tail was shorter than that of a wildcat, and unlike the tails of domestic cats it did not taper towards the tip. The animal's most striking physical feature was its noticeably long limbs, the hind legs being particularly powerful. The skeletal features of the ABC showed individual similarities to both domestic cats and wildcats, but was not entirely like either. Its gut-length was short, like a wildcat's.

An unpublished British Museum (Natural History) assessment of the Kellas cats and atypical Advie specimen, prepared by Daphne Hills, concluded that the mounted Kellas cat displayed by Di Francis was probably a melanistic European wildcat, though it could also be either a feral animal or a feral/wildcat cross. The Advie cat was, Hills thought, probably a hybrid.

Dr Shuker was bolder in his analysis. He pointed out that the four Kellas specimens so far obtained were too similar to each other to be part of a population of breeding ferals, in which wide differences would be expected between offspring. Hybrids, he said, certainly did exist in abundance, but again the uniformity of the Kellas cats made him doubt that feral/wildcat crosses were the explanation. The hybrid captured by a *Tomorrow's World* team [FT47 p14] was also markedly dissimilar to the Kellas animals, Shuker said. That animal was larger, stouter, and had shorter limbs and smaller teeth than the Kellas specimen he had examined.

Melanistic wildcats were also improbable candidates, Dr Shuker continued. Wildcat behaviour did not match that reported from the Dallas area, the Kellas cats hunting in pairs, by day, and preferring to catch fish rather than hunt mammals. Unlike wildcats, the Kellas animals were not arboreal, and witnesses described them as "loping gracefully" rather than prowling in the manner approved by the average wildcat.

Instead Shuker favoured a "more daring, speculative hypothesis", pointing out some striking similarities between the Moray ABCs and a peculiar Transcaucasian wildcat described by the Russian zoologist Satunin in the 1920s and later explained away as the misidentification of an existing species by his country's scientific establishment. Dr Shuker suggested that the Transcaucasian and Moray ABC communities could be relics of a previously widely-distributed species, possibly introduced to Britain by the Romans. (There is a little philological evidence to support this contention in Scottish place-names, as well as an intriguing folkloric tradition of jet-black Highland 'fairy cats'.) The Kellas cats seem to occupy a different ecological niche to the wildcat, Shuker observed, pointing out that their long legs, powerful hind-quarters and non-retractable claws indicated "a running mode of existence". He concluded that it was possible that they were indeed members of a new, previously unknown species, and called for field-work to investigate "a most important new zoological discovery" in its natural environment.

KING CHEETAHS AND MEXICAN ONZAS

The Kellas paper was the most exciting delivered at the conference, but it was succeeded by some interesting offerings concerning big cats in southern Africa and Mexico. The naturalists Lena and Paul Bottriell described their search for the 'King Cheetah', or 'hyena-leopard', reported in the Zimbabwe area for the last hundred years or so, and given (temporary) generic status in 1929. The King Cheetah appears to be a mutant leopard, they said, for although its markings resemble those of the cheetah proper, with the addition of black dorsal stripes, examination of coat samples showed that the King Cheetah had the leopard's 'petal pattern' hair. The cheetah was, in addition, the least adaptable of the big cats, and had produced only three credible mutations in the past – one white animal reported from India, a single red-spotted cheetah suffering from partial albinism, and a pale or lesser spotted specimen skinned in 1926.

Historically, said Lena Bottriell, the King Cheetah was "not a throwback but a development of something" – a recent development, but a puzzling one because all 40 specimens so far obtained were very similar, which generally meant that mutation was an unlikely explanation. However, the rapidly-changing habitat of the animals might encourage unusually rapid evolution. Observing that the King Cheetah's emergence coincided with a dramatic decline in the cheetah population, she and her husband suggested that the new animal might be an emerging leopard subspecies manifesting itself as a mutation, and taking advantage of the widespread eradication of the cheetah proper to take over its ecological niche. The King Cheetah's colouring also indicates that it is adapting to life in woodlands rather than the open grasslands previously favoured by most big cats. "There never was a more lucid example of evolution happening before your eyes," the Bottriells concluded.

J. Richard Greenwell, the ISC's Secretary, and Troy Best, a New Mexico mammalogist, then delivered a rather similar paper on the onza, a puma-like animal occasionally reported from the Mexican highlands and elsewhere since the early sixteenth century. A few supposed onzas had been shot, and a book on the subject had been written in 1961 (receiving hostile reviews), but it was generally asserted that these longer, leaner carcasses were merely emaciated pumas – a hypothesis supported by the unusually wide variations observable among the 1,700 puma specimens in American

collections. Even if the onza was a real animal, it was agreed, it was so similar to the puma that it could be easily mistaken for one.

In 1985 Greenwell learned of a supposed onza which had been shot by a rancher in the Sinaloa area of Mexico; this, and a second, much better preserved, animal killed in January 1986 gave him and his colleagues the opportunity to conduct a thorough scientific examination of a good specimen. They concluded that the better-preserved big cat was a female onza which had been in good health, and was not merely a starving puma. Comparison with museum fossil collections showed that the onza was not, as had been suggested, a relic from the Pleistocene but was indeed an animal very similar to the modern puma. Rejecting the hypotheses that it was a sub-species of puma or a puma-jaguar hybrid, Greenwell and Best concluded that the onza is probably either a new species, possibly one evolving to fill the ecological niche left by the now-extinct American cheetah, or (less likely) a breeding mutation. [A detailed account, by Greenwell, was published in the July 1987 issue of *BBC Wildlife*.]

The last paper of the conference concerned the Queensland tiger, the vicious striped ABC reported from the north-east Australian coast since 1871, and supposed by some researchers to be surviving specimens of the marsupial lion *Thylacoleo*. By now the programme was running almost an hour late and the author, Dr Victor Albert of Brown University, Rhode Island, delivered his address to a dwindling audience. Several delegates had to leave to catch trains, and since your correspondent was one of those who dwindled for this reason, FT is unable to bring you a full report of what promised to be a very interesting paper. Dr Albert did, however, suggest that he was going to update Bernard Heuvelmans' writings on the subject with some new evidence indicating that *Thylacoleo* might indeed have survived into modern times.

[Our correspondent Jim Darroch was able to stay till the end of the conference. He writes that "the evidence for the Queensland Tiger does indeed seem to be sketchy. For instance, the last 'sighting' was in 1973 and no one has ever obtained any actual physical evidence of said tiger (which, incidentally, is the size of a domestic cat). The habitat is dense forest, which ensures rapid deterioration of remains."]

Overall, then, an interesting event made worthwhile by an important update of British ABC reports. Hopefully as cryptozoology establishes itself the ISC will be able to present programmes which include more fieldwork, more analysis and fewer retrospectives.